

Image Threshold – The Films and Videos of Malcolm Le Grice
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Malcolm Le Grice came to filmmaking via art school. He was a painting graduate of the Slade in 1965 and went on to teach at St. Martins and Goldsmiths, during which time he began making films using his own handmade equipment to print and process film. An artisanal approach to filmmaking combined with the modernist concept of ‘truth to materials’ and the inspiration of artists including Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg were foundations for Le Grice. Abstract colour-field works from *Matrix* (1973) through to the 3D *Marking Time* (2015) are filmic takes on ‘post-painterly abstraction’, while classic pieces such as *Castle I* (1966) and *After Leonardo* (originally 1973 and continually reworked) appropriate and recycle images as the basis of a media critique.

The diverse and influential career of Malcolm Le Grice makes him one of the most eminent avant-garde filmmakers working today. He has been a particularly important figure in Britain, where he has had a defining role in the context and history of experimental filmmaking. By 1969, Le Grice’s film workshop facilities were integrated with the London Filmmakers Co-op (an organisation whose 60th anniversary the BFI is currently celebrating). Later roles on Arts Council and BFI production committees, plus increasingly senior positions in education, also enabled him to promote the field. The other activity most closely tied to his own filmmaking has been his writing. Polemical essays have provided a theoretical backdrop for his work, and with original writing on other filmmakers from Europe and the UK, Le Grice has elaborated a history of avant-garde film.

My own introduction to Malcolm Le Grice’s films, and experimental cinema in more widely, came from VHS tapes I found in my art school library when I was a foundation student in 1994. Most were off-air recordings of two or three television series, including *Midnight Underground* a wonderful showcase for experimental film, which had recently been broadcast on Channel 4. These made for an eclectic point of departure, but paired with Le Grice’s book *Abstract Film and Beyond* (1977), which was also on the shelves, it was possible to establish a sense of the field. Following his description of films, from early avant-garde films such as Hans Richter’s *Rhythm 21* (1921-24) through to the account of his own work and that of his peers, I quickly understood that cinema (and by extension television) could be conceived in ways that were completely antithetical to everything I had taken it to be: drama, acting and storytelling were unnecessary; filmmaking needn’t require formulaic methods of pre-production or professionalised labour; and nor did its function need to be tied to an audience’s entertainment. Le Grice’s *Berlin Horse* (1970) is a primary example.

The experience of watching *Berlin Horse* rests on an appreciation of its almost pure plastic elements: colour, movement, rhythm and segments of time. These elements are only ‘almost pure’ because they are activated by the film’s

imagery, which derives from two sets of footage, is very important. One is a shot of a horse being led round a training ring (filmed in the village of Berlin, north of Hamburg) that has subsequently been re-filmed from various angles at different speeds. The other piece of footage comes from *The Burning Stable*, a film made by the Edison manufacturing company in 1896. Both sets of footage appear in negative and positive as well as superimposed and vividly coloured. The imagery of the film resonates in different ways. For one thing the lunging of the horse is reflected in the film's looping structure. The added colour dramatizes the burning stable scene, and calls to mind the misregistration and 'fringing' endemic in certain experimental colour processes during the early part of the 20th century. The motif of the horse in motion also places the film in a lineage that includes Eadweard Muybridge's proto-cinematic studies of animal locomotion. But for all this, the use of imagery is not directed towards drama, documentary or even reflexivity as such. The aesthetic of the film is a distinct and unique alternative to given modes and conventions of filmmaking.

Le Grice was a pro-genitor of the British mode of 'structural film', which found its most eloquent and confrontational advocate in Peter Gidal, whose account of 'structural/materialist film' often picks up on ideas first manifest in Le Grice's work. In this context, the critical importance of Le Grice's films was the degree to which the representational image was undermined by foregrounding other material aspects of the medium, spanning the surface texture of the projected image to the live experience of watching a film. To paraphrase an idea in one of Le Grice's own essays, 'Real Time/Space' (1972), the 'projection event' took precedence over represented content - an overhaul of cinema's default mode.

The image is put under stress and made opaque in numerous films throughout the early part of Le Grice's career. *Castle 1*, which remains his most combative work, uses television and documentary film footage of industrial, political and military activities mixed with assorted audio extracts from news reports, advertising slogans and organ music. A shot of a light bulb also recurs, while a real light bulb hanging in front of the screen sporadically flashes on and off, obliterating the projected image and illuminating the audience. A military-industrial complex also features in *Threshold* (1972), a triple-projector piece equally as colourful as *Berlin Horse*. Looped footage of soldiers at a sentry post materialise from swathes of red, green and yellow, and subsequently splinter, from the effect of multiple superimposition, to become images on the threshold of definition.

Several of Le Grice's films involve elements of live performance or multi-projection configurations – they also exist in different versions, including new reworked digital iterations – and as such they are often characterised as 'expanded cinema'. Le Grice's most dynamic piece in this vein is *Horror Film 1* (1971). Standing in front of the screen, with arms outstretched, his reach marks the dimensions of three overlapping projected colour fields. As he backs away from the screen, through the audience, his shadow becomes the image; and the nearer he gets to the three projectors, the more complicated the coloured shadow becomes. *Horror*

Film is Le Grice's most majestic work because it's the figure of the filmmaker that determines the measure of the piece. But it's also a work in which the definition of the projected image is most thoroughly and provocatively questioned.

From the mid 1970s Le Grice began a series of works where his explorations concerned imagery that functioned in the context of narrative space. *After Manet – Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe* (1975) references the generic scene of a picnic (as painted by Manet, and many others) reimagined as an event that unfolds across four screens, depicting the perspectives of its participants. Three subsequent 'long-form' works, *Blackbird Descending - Tense Alignment* (1977), *Emily - Third Party Speculation* (1979) and *Finnegan's Chin - Temporal Economy* (1981) are single screen films that 'deconstruct' narrative conventions even more explicitly. These films are his least radical works and have rarely been shown in recent years. The inclusion of *Blackbird Descending* in the current BFI retrospective perhaps speaks to the passing enthusiasm for artists' features films.

The mid 1980s saw several short single-screen video works compiled as *Sketches for a Sensual Philosophy* (1986-89). Returning to a more intimate form of filmmaking – the basis of much of his early work, albeit often expanded and worked up for multi-projection – Le Grice quickly found a way to make video work in an equally direct manner. *Digital Still Life* (1984-86) is the most important of these pieces and shows a key moment in Le Grice's investigation and transformation of imagery through digital means. Employing rudimentary programming tools, the elements of a still life composition and accompanying piano playing, are transformed into discrete tone rows, fragments of time and pixelated cells of primary colours.

Much of Le Grice's video work has used handheld observational diary footage, gleaned from trips abroad and closer to home. Another tentatively titled compilation of these videos is *Trials and Tribulations* (1990-2004). The brevity of these pieces contrasts the major mythopoeic works *Chronos Fragmented* (1995), *Even The Cyclops Pays the Ferryman* (1998) and *Finiti* (2011). These are bravura works that take on grand themes of mortality and the remembrance of things past, rivalling any of Stan Brakhage's films in their scope and vision, which is quite an about-turn given the critique of the Brakhage and the notion of the Romantic artist that was key to some of Le Grice's earlier writing.

The potential for large format, multi-screen video projection that Le Grice has exploited since *The Cyclops Cycle* (1998/2003) takes his work back to the scale of expanded cinema that he explored in the early 1970s. The means and ends are rather different however, when the expanded video works, including the 3D piece *Where When* (2015), often involve explicitly personal imagery in associational, symbolic and emotive combinations. In the video pieces typifying his 'late style' the images are crisp and high definition, though they may be complicated by compositional strategies involving collage, layering and incisive editing. In contrast, film pieces such as *Castle I*, *Berlin Horse*, *Threshold* and *Horror Film* counter one's sense of the meaning and substance of imagery from the outset.

Having said that, Malcolm Le Grice's wide-ranging career has hardly followed a linear trajectory, especially when one notes his early interest in electronic imaging, computer programming and digital aesthetics. It has long been a maxim of his writing and reflection that 'theory follows practice' and in this regard he is fundamentally an intuitive artist. Correspondingly, Le Grice has often recently said that he has 'no idea' where new work will take him; that's the expression of an attitude that defines experimental practice.

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